

Social media behind the firewall promote Army-wide collaboration

By Claire Schwerin

Social media use is changing the way service members complete their missions and Department of Defense leaders are taking notice.

General officers are urging Soldiers to use secure wikis to update field manuals with their

lessons-learned from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chaplains are communicating through a Facebook-style forum to discuss suicide prevention, training resources and prayers. Engineers are soliciting online feedback on cutting-edge power and energy sources that won't weigh down troops.

With the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications in the commercial world, the military is taking notice of how those same technologies can support a major cultural change: Less of the traditional top-down, "need to know," and more of the "responsibility to share."

Underlying it all is milSuite, a collection of user-friendly knowledge management tools mirroring popular social media platforms – but located securely behind DoD firewalls, so users can discuss sensitive but unclassified information. Initially launched in 2009 for a relatively small group of Army organizations, milSuite became available to the rest of the DoD in February 2011.

"I truly believe this technology can change the way we communicate on a scale we haven't seen since the introduction of email," said Emerson Keslar, director of the Military Technical Solutions Office (MilTech Solutions), a government organization of the Army's Program Executive Office Command, Control and Communications-Tactical and one of the architects of the milSuite project.

"If I'm working on a new mobile app, energy-efficient technology or budget process for the Army, there is a good chance that somebody in the Navy or the Air Force is doing the same thing," he said. "With milSuite, I can find that person and we can combine our efforts. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of processes that can be made more efficient by harnessing secure social media."

Grassroots start

The milSuite design was not originally designed to be transformative. When the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Act mandated the closure of Fort Monmouth, N.J. and transition to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., PEO C3T and other Army organizations based at Fort Monmouth realized they were facing a massive brain drain. With predictions that approximately 70 percent of the workforce – including many highly trained

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milBlog is a community blog for the DoD where users can post news, events, and announcements, as well as provide feedback and comments in a traditional blog format. Its purpose is to provide the DoD community a secure internal channel to broadcast its messages to a greater audience. milBlog can be used to share knowledge regarding Department of Defense (DoD) exercises, events, system/product announcements, and community interest stories. The combinations of posts and comments collectively act as a living time capsule detailing knowledge and experiences across the community.

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appliance so users can locate the specific resources they need. All use adaptable and scalable products such as Jive Social Business Software – creating an environment that can easily bend and expand to meet the evolving needs of its user base at low cost for software.

With a small team and low budget, milSuite spread throughout the Army largely through grassroots appeal. Often users stumbled upon the tools through a link on another site, or a reference from a friend.

“That’s what makes milSuite so different from the other knowledge management tools I have seen implemented in the Army over the last decade,” Keslar said. “Usually you have to train people, and sometimes force people, to start using the resource. With milSuite they got it on their own.”

From wiki doctrine to weapons systems to mobile apps

By late 2010, tens of thousands of users from hundreds of Army organizations were using the tools to collaborate. That included the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, which launched a pilot project on milWiki to promote online collaboration of Army field manuals, allowing the knowledge and experiences of Soldiers conducting operations to be rapidly incorporated into doctrine. Like Wikipedia, anyone could edit and the content was shaped by the wisdom of the crowd. Unlike Wikipedia, no changes were anonymous – and each user had to have a Common Access Card to see the site in the first place.

“The purpose of the portal

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acquisition, logistics and technology professionals – would choose not to relocate, it was feared that their knowledge would evaporate.

As BRAC realities settled in during 2008-09, Keslar’s team devised a mechanism to capture and preserve some of that expertise. Using Web 2.0 technologies that at the time were in their infancy – at least when it came to military implementation – they set up a news blog and a wiki behind the firewall. One forum was for community-wide updates, the other a living repository of institutional knowledge.

What started as an effort to preserve the knowledge of one installation soon caught fire within the broader Army community. New tools were

added – including a crucial Facebook-like application that allowed users intimidated by the free-for-all of the wiki environment to break off into smaller working groups with varying levels of privacy.

With the launch of a YouTube-like capability in late 2010, the suite now consists of four secure applications: milWiki, a living military encyclopedia editable by subject matter experts; milBook, a professional networking tool providing communities of practice; milBlog, a place to share and comment on internal news and events; and milTube, a video-sharing capability for the military workforce. The tools are integrated with one another through a common user profile and linked by a Google search

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is to incorporate insights and lessons-learned from Soldiers and officers, based upon recent experiences in theater; but the goal is to ensure tactics, techniques and procedures remain relevant,” said GEN Peter W. Chiarelli, vice chief of staff of the Army, soon after the program’s launch. The pilot remains ongoing, and new manuals continue to be added.

A more recent partnership between milSuite and the U.S. Army Forces Command combines milWiki, milBook and milTube to construct a secure online location where Soldiers can go to see and understand the equipment they are going to encounter in theater. They will have the ability to sort that information by echelon, watch training videos and locate systems through a visual, web-based tactical operations center view.

At the U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command’s communications-electronics center, technology developers have leveraged milBook to collect user feedback about power and energy sources that are under development. A “C2

Mobile” group on milBook links CERDEC engineers with others across the DoD who are working on mission command applications for mobile devices.

“Those of us developing smartphone apps for the DoD all confront the same issues – security, information assurance, interoperability with existing systems,” said Michael Anthony, chief of the Mission Command division of CERDEC’s Command and Control Directorate and manager of the Collaborative Battlespace Reasoning and Awareness Army Technology Objective. “The beauty of this group is we can leverage one another’s knowledge and investments to more quickly deliver relevant technologies.”

Not all projects use secure social media to reinvent a process or improve a product. Some simply connect disparate communities of interest – such as Army chaplains. Paul Villano, knowledge management officer for the U.S. Army Chaplaincy, began using milSuite as an alternative to emails and newsletters for communicating with chaplains and chaplain assistants.

“I’ve been able to contact a much wider audience than I could have otherwise reached,” Villano said. “It also allows ‘back and forth’ collaboration and threading.”

His primary group on milBook – visible to the entire user community – now has more than 450 members, with some discussion threads garnering more than 1,000 views. That space links to other more private groups where chaplains can handle more sensitive topics.

“We’ve come to see that knowledge management is about the people using what the people are most comfortable with using to do what people do best: share, as easily as possible,” Villano said. “Since milSuite meets that goal so well, we’re happy to use it to support chaplains and chaplain assistants who provide religious support to Soldiers and their families.”

Another community of interest came together after the Army began rolling out its new web-enabled financial and accounting management system in 2009. General Fund Enterprise Business System officials created spaces on milWiki and milBook where users could locate system information and ask questions in secure discussion groups.

“It provides one place to send users to get accurate and relevant information about the program,” said Jennifer Randolph, a

The screenshot displays the milWiki main page, which is a secure online encyclopedia for the military community. The page features a top navigation bar with links like 'page', 'discussion', 'edit', 'history', 'delete', 'move', 'undo', 'watch', and 'refresh'. Below this is a search bar and a sidebar with navigation links such as 'Main Page', 'Create an Article', 'Categories', 'New Articles', 'All Articles', 'All Images', 'All Pages', and 'Recent Changes'. The main content area includes a welcome message, a featured article titled 'The joint basing effort is a cost-effective way to manage military installations...', a list of projects, and a section for 'Department of Defense (DoD) Wikis'. The page also includes a footer with a disclaimer: 'Use of this U.S. Government system, authorized or unauthorized, constitutes consent to monitoring of this system. Unauthorized use may subject you to criminal prosecution. Evidence of unauthorized use collected during monitoring may be used for administrative, criminal or other adverse actions.'

knowledge management specialist for the Program Executive Office, Enterprise Information Systems and one of the architects of the GFEBS Web 2.0 project. "Our KM solution expands the knowledge base of the users by allowing them to share information and experiences among themselves, which in turn would reduce help desk tickets."

For GFEBS – which ultimately will be used by more than 79,000 financial professionals at nearly 200 locations worldwide – that "horizontal" communication between individuals who perform similar jobs at different organizations was essential to customer service.

The major factors driving the decision to use milSuite were the built-in security features, integration with an AKO document repository and the ease of use in creating a community presence, Randolph said.

"If either (customers or employees) sees the KM system as a burden, they will not use it," Randolph said.

Secure Social Media for the Enterprise

In 2011, the milSuite team implemented the logistical and cultural changes necessary to bring its grassroots, user-driven approach to the enterprise level. To open the doors to more non-Army users, milSuite changed its authentication method from logging in with an Army Knowledge Online/Defense Knowledge Online account to logging in with a Common Access Card. In collaboration with the Defense Information Systems Agency, milSuite also migrated from its first home at an Army.mil URL to <https://www.milsuite.mil>, a URL that is not service-specific.

In just over two months, the number of registered users spiked by 10,000, including many from the Navy, Air Force and others who were previously unaware. In August, there were 162,000 members – from interns to 99 Army General Officers who were registered users of milBook. Those same senior leaders have their own milBook community: ORION, which proponents hope will reduce primary dependency on mass email distribution and frequent face-to-face meetings by providing a secure online forum to coordinate effort, develop and refine issues, and make decisions.

"I'm still amazed on a daily basis by the innovative ways our users apply the technologies to support so many different missions," Keslar said. "At a time when we are all focused on efficiencies, milSuite is one way we can overcome the geographic and organizational divisions of the military community to share information instantly."

Claire Schwerin is a staff writer for Symbolic Systems, Inc., supporting the Army's Program Executive Office Command, Control and Communications-Tactical).